

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 16-1176V

Filed: June 13, 2018

UNPUBLISHED

MARIE CRONIN,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Special Processing Unit (SPU);
Attorneys' Fees and Costs

Amy A. Senerth, Muller Brazil, LLP, Dresher, PA, for petitioner.

Colleen Clemons Hartley, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEYS' FEES AND COSTS¹

Dorsey, Chief Special Master:

On September 21, 2016, Marie Cronin ("petitioner") filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*,² (the "Vaccine Act" or "Program"). Petitioner alleges that she suffered left shoulder injuries resulting from an influenza vaccine administered on October 24, 2013. Petition at ¶¶ 1-3. On March 14, 2018, the undersigned issued a decision denying compensation to petitioner. (ECF No. 33).

On May 18, 2018, petitioner filed a motion for attorneys' fees and costs. (ECF No. 35). Petitioner requests attorneys' fees in the amount of \$23,026.00 and attorneys' costs in the amount of \$1,340.89. *Id.* at 2. In accordance with General Order #9,

¹ Because this unpublished decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action in this case, the undersigned intends to post it on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2012) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, the undersigned agrees that the identified material fits within this definition, the undersigned will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all "§" references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

petitioner's counsel represents that petitioner incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. *Id.* at 2. Thus, the total amount requested is \$24,366.89.

On May 21, 2018, respondent filed a response to petitioner's motion. (ECF No. 36). Respondent argues that "[n]either the Vaccine Act nor Vaccine Rule 13 contemplates any role for respondent in the resolution of a request by a petitioner for an award of attorneys' fees and costs." *Id.* at 1. Respondent adds, however, that he "is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case." *Id.* at 2. Respondent "respectfully recommends that the Chief Special Master exercise her discretion and determine a reasonable award for attorneys' fees and costs." *Id.* at 3.

Petitioner has filed no reply.

The undersigned has reviewed the billing records submitted with petitioner's request. In the undersigned's experience, the request appears reasonable, and the undersigned finds no cause to reduce the requested hours or rates with the following exceptions. Due to attorney C. Clark Hodgson, III's inexperience in the Vaccine Program, the undersigned does find cause to reduce his hourly rate from the requested \$225 an hour to \$200 an hour. Therefore, attorneys' fees are **reduced by \$765.00**.³

With regard to attorney Paul Brazil's requested hourly rate of \$350 for work performed in 2018, the undersigned finds the proposed rate excessive based on his overall legal experience, the quality of work performed, his experience in the Vaccine Program, and his reputation in the legal community and the community at large. See *McCulloch v. Health and Human Services*, No. 09–293V, 2015 WL 5634323, at *17 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Sept. 1, 2015) (stating the following factors are paramount in deciding a reasonable forum hourly rate: experience in the Vaccine Program, overall legal experience, the quality of work performed, and the reputation in the legal community and community at large). The determination of the amount of reasonable attorneys' fees is within the special master's discretion. See, e.g., *Saxton v. Health and Human Services*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1520 (Fed. Cir. 1993). Special masters have "wide latitude in determining the reasonableness of both attorneys' fees and costs." *Hines v. Health and Human Services*, 22 Cl. Ct. 750, 753 (Fed. Cl. 1991). Moreover, special masters are entitled to rely on their own experience and understanding of the issues raised. *Wasson v. Health and Human Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 483 (Fed. Cl. 1991), *aff'd in relevant part*, 988 F.2d 131 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (per curiam). Under the Court's Fee Schedule, an attorney in the range of 4-7 years of experience are entitled to hourly rates between \$238 - \$317 for work performed in 2018.⁴ A rate of \$317 per hour is a more appropriate rate given the undersigned's experience and analysis of the *McCulloch*

³ This amount is calculated by reducing the requested rate by the awarded rate multiplied by hours billed. (\$225 - \$200 = \$25 * 30.6 = \$765).

⁴ The Attorneys' Fee Schedule for 2018 is available at <http://www.cofc.uscourts.gov/node/2914>

factors as applied to Mr. Brazil. Therefore, the undersigned **reduces the fee request by \$19.80.**⁵

In regards to attorney Amy Senerth, a rate of \$225 per hour was awarded for work performed in 2017. Ms. Senerth's requested rate of \$250 per hour for work in 2018 is outside the experience range for an attorney with 2 years' experience. Under the Court's Fee Schedule, an attorney in the range of 1-4 years' experience is entitled to hourly rates between \$159 - \$238 for work performed in 2018. Her increase for 2018, based on the Producer Price Index for the "Office of Lawyers" (PPI-OL), provided by the Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, would result in a rate \$233 per hour, which is a more appropriate rate given the undersigned's experience and analysis of the McCulloch factors as applied to Ms. Senerth. Therefore the **undersigned reduces the fee request by \$15.30.**⁶

The full amount of costs sought, \$1,340.89, is awarded.

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorneys' fees and costs. § 15(e). Based on the reasonableness of petitioner's request, the undersigned **GRANTS** petitioner's motion for attorneys' fees and costs.

Accordingly, the undersigned awards the total of \$23,566.79⁷ as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to petitioner and petitioner's counsel Amy A. Senerth.

The clerk of the court shall enter judgment in accordance herewith.⁸

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Nora Beth Dorsey
Nora Beth Dorsey
Chief Special Master

⁵ This amount is calculated by reducing the requested rate by the awarded rate multiplied by hours billed. (\$350 - \$317 = \$33 * 0.6 = \$19.80).

⁶ This amount is calculated by reducing the requested rate by the awarded rate multiplied by hours billed. (\$250 - \$233 = \$17 * 0.9 = \$15.30).

⁷ This amount is intended to cover all legal expenses incurred in this matter. This award encompasses all charges by the attorney against a client, "advanced costs" as well as fees for legal services rendered. Furthermore, § 15(e)(3) prevents an attorney from charging or collecting fees (including costs) that would be in addition to the amount awarded herein. See *generally Beck v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 924 F.2d 1029 (Fed. Cir.1991).

⁸ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), entry of judgment can be expedited by the parties' joint filing of notice renouncing the right to seek review.